

Abstract

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The Europeanisation of the Construction Industry

The construction / building industry in Europe and before that in Germany is changing its structure in terms of required skills, organization of work (long-term vs. short-term contracts, hierarchy of work chains, crew of workers), companies' size and fields of action, structure of the whole sector (general contractors, supply chains, from carrying out to "total facility management" and service), and the structure of employees (skills, age, ethnics, status [migrant or resident], use of machines). Even the line between planning and building, between using and maintaining is not working anymore in the way it used to do for the last decades.

Especially the consequences for the workforce can not be underestimated. The number of employees is decreasing in Germany and in Europe now already for some seven to ten years, the sector's share of the GDP is getting smaller, too. As a result it is to say that the sector's economic (and social) position is falling off rapidly and heavily. In the German (and European) debate (including my own works) some key-words are used to highlight the sector's characteristics, actual problems and dynamics: "skills trap", "skills pyramid", "anticipating qualifying", "hierarchy trap", "reversed factor of mobility", "dilemma of the view narrowed to business administration", "new rationalism: atomising or co-operation", "shortening of exploitation's horizons", "reductive spiral", "double change of structure", "stigmatising of the construction sector".

Additionally on the one hand the influence of branch agreements is decreasing and on the other hand the agreements tend towards a plant level. This has a big impact on the position of both branch trade unions and employers federations. This must not be seen as phenomena existing only in the building sector, but here it is of higher importance due to the specific character of the sector which is deeply depending both on the general economic situation and development and on a common form of organization.

The EU-enlargement which took place recently will cause a high pressure additionally to those already existing. Mobility of work-force, e.g. transnational contracting, groups and subsidiary networks, and the migration of workers, is an outstanding characteristic in the construction sector. Legal and illegal forms of workers' posting are part of normality on European building sites. A large part of the sector has become informal and construction labour is – again – highly casual.

Thus, Europeanisation is a challenge for the workers and for the trade unions, but also for the sector as such. And there is the fear that this challenge is not only positive in terms of growing markets and generating a higher economic potential, but also negative in terms of weakening the trade unions' position, strengthening the ideology of liberalized markets and, therefore, creating a vicious circle.